

BEYOND THE BLAME GAME

*It's easy to blame the media for climate change confusion.
It's also incorrect—and dangerously distracting.*

BY MATTHEW C. NISBET

In the 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth*, one of the more memorable comparisons that Al Gore offers his audience is the supposed difference between the state of climate science and how it is portrayed in the news media. His comparison opens like this: "Isn't there a disagreement among scientists about whether the problem is real or not?"

"Actually, not really," answers Gore.

"There was a massive study of every scientific article in a peer-reviewed journal written on global warming in the last 10 years," Gore continues, referring to a 2004 essay published in *Science* by historian Naomi Oreskes. "They took a big sample of 10 percent, 928 articles. And you know the number of those that disagreed with the scientific consensus that we're causing global warming and that it is a serious problem out of the 928: Zero." Gore then goes on to discuss an industry-linked memo that planned to "reposition global warming as a theory rather than fact."

"But have they succeeded?" he then asks. "There was another study of all the articles in the popular press," says Gore, referring to a 2004 study by social scientists Max and Jules Boykoff. "Over the last 14 years they looked at a sample of 636. More than half of them said, 'Well, we are not sure. It could be a problem, may not be a problem.' So no wonder people are confused."

Gore repeated his comparison in his 2009 book *Our Choice: A Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis*, citing again the Boykoff study. In a 2010 blog post, Gore repeated the critique, asserting: "Over all the media's coverage of the climate issue has been atrocious."


Gore is the most prominent voice among a chorus of climate advocates who continue to blame societal inaction on news coverage. In fact, the assertion has become a well-worn ritual that animates scientific meetings, public forums, blogs and popular writing.

Yet the reality of news coverage is more complex than commonly argued. Just as important, the persistent belief that media show false balance in coverage of climate change serves as a dangerous distraction, averting critical reflection on our policy and communication approaches to the problem.

CONVEYING CONSENSUS » In a 2007 study titled "Flogging a Dead Norm?," Max Boykoff examined climate change coverage appearing between 2003 and 2006. He found that by 2006, false balance in coverage had almost completely disappeared from major U.S. news outlets. More than 96 percent of coverage that year reflected

the consensus view that climate change was real and humans were a cause.

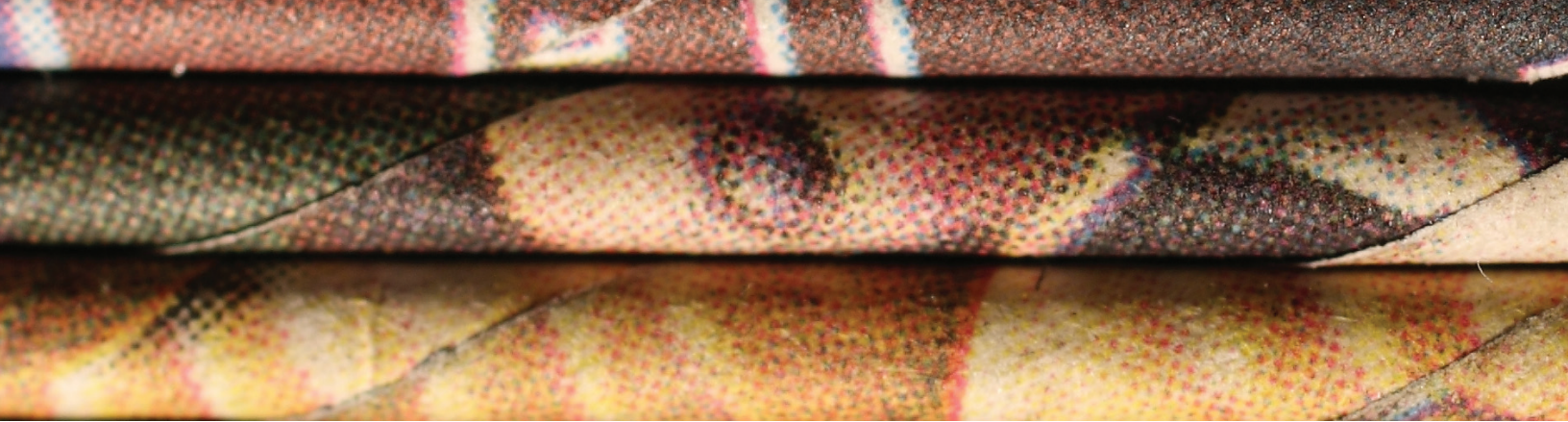
As Boykoff and others have described, not all dimensions of the climate debate have a clear



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standard by which to rate journalists. On the assertions that CO₂ warms the planet and that humans contribute to climate change, there is overwhelming scientific agreement, and therefore a clear objective basis to judge the media if they fail to accurately convey this consensus. Other assertions, however, such as whether climate change has intensified hurricane impacts, or if cap-and-trade legislation is an effective solution, remain subjects where journalists should emphasize some debate and discussion.

In a recent report, I replicated Boykoff's studies to assess coverage between 2009 and 2010, as



Congress debated cap-and-trade legislation, as the Copenhagen climate talks took place, and as publicly released e-mails from the University of East Anglia were debated, an incident now known as “Climategate.” Using standard social science procedures, three graduate students were trained

portrayal was confined largely to the opinion pages. Across the two-year period at least eight out of 10 news articles at the paper reflected the consensus view, but at the opinion pages, less than half of the articles portrayed climate change as real and human caused.

The dismissive nature of the *Wall Street Journal* opinion page is consistent with the findings from other recent studies. Analyzing coverage between 1997 and 2007, Australian communication researcher James McKnight notes the strong emphasis by News Corporation–owned newspapers and TV outlets in the U.K., Australia and the U.S. to emphasize in their commentary the uncertainty of climate change, framing climate science as dominated by

political correctness and, in contrast, contrarians as courageous dissenters.

SUSCEPTIBLE SCIENTISTS » If analyses as far back as 2006 clearly point to an absence of false balance in news coverage, why is belief in false balance so pervasive?

As I review in the report, research shows that individuals more heavily involved in an issue, such as climate scientists, tend to view even objectively favorable media coverage as hostile to their goals. They also tend to presume exaggerated effects for a message on the public and will take action based on this presumed influence.

Scientists are also susceptible to the biases of their own political ideology, which survey data

show is overwhelmingly liberal. Ideology shapes how scientists evaluate policy options such as cap and trade as well as their interpretations of who or what is to blame for policy failures (usually the media and conservatives). Given a more liberal outlook, stronger environmental values and a deeper trust of government than the general public, it is often difficult for scientists to understand why so many Americans have reservations about complex policies that impose costs on consumers without offering clearly defined benefits. Compounding matters, scientists—like the rest of us—tend to gravitate toward like-minded sources in the media. Given their background, they focus on screeds from liberal commentators that reinforce a false sense of a “war” against the scientific community.

Progress on climate change requires clear vision. If environmental organizations are going to effectively reformulate policy following the demise of cap and trade, and if science organizations are going to empower Americans to participate and make decisions on the issue, scorn for media needs to be replaced by critical self-examination.

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BIG THINK

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to reliably rate a representative sample of coverage taken from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, CNN.com, Politico and *Wall Street Journal*. They were asked to judge whether the reality and causes of climate change were portrayed according to the consensus view (climate change is real and human caused), balanced view (we don’t know if climate change is real, or if humans are a cause), or dismissive view (climate change is not happening, or there is no role for humans).

Across the two-year period, at the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and CNN.com, at least nine out of 10 news and opinion articles reflected the consensus view on climate change. At Politico, during this period, at least seven out of 10 articles portrayed the consensus view. Only at the *Wall Street Journal* did this trend not hold up. Yet even in this case, the difference in